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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1252

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 NOUAKCHOTT 000503

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/28/2014

TAGS: [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [MASS](#) [ASEC](#) [PTER](#) [AMGT](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: MAURITANIA -- ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY WITH THE AZIZ
GOVERNMENT

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 496

Classified By: Ambassador Mark M. Boulware for Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

11. (C) New Environment Needs New Strategy: Mission Country Team (including visiting Rabat-based LEGAT) held an off-site July 27 to consider revisions of the Mission Strategic Plan in light of the July 18 election of President-elect Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and the June 23 killing of Christopher Leggett -- the first American victim of AQIM terrorism in the region. The Ambassador briefed the Country Team on his meeting with President-Elect Aziz of July 26 (REFTEL) where Aziz said all the right things about being a president for all Mauritians and paying attention to the many challenges facing the country rather than picking fights with the opposition. Aziz said he looked forward to close cooperation with the U.S. on counterterrorism but also hoped to engage the U.S. in all areas of bilateral cooperation. The Ambassador told the Country Team that, while Mauritania will not be able to regain the reputation as a "model of democracy for Africa and the Arab world" that the Abdallahi Government had enjoyed, there were good prospects to rebuild a normal relationship with Mauritania.

12. (C) New Assumptions: Before discussing how to engage the new government, the Country Team took stock of changes in the environment that will affect our ability to do business.

On the Positive Side:

-- CT Commitment: Having seen the Mauritanian response to the Christopher Leggett murder, we are convinced of the depth of Mauritanian commitment as a partner against terrorism. President-Elect Aziz told the Ambassador he is ready to "open the floodgates" in terms of security cooperation. New relationships forged with the police, Attorney General, and Ministry of Justice open new areas of vital CT cooperation in the judicial and police field where Mauritania is weakest.

-- Good Will: The principled position held by the U.S. has gained the U.S. the admiration of those Mauritians who fought the coup and perhaps the respect even of those who supported the coup. That, coupled with the region-wide boost in the U.S. image driven by President Obama's election and new policies for Africa and the Arab World, provides the opportunity to cultivate a Mauritanian public that is well disposed to the U.S. Beyond the general interest in having a positive U.S. image, this shift in public sentiment has a direct impact on our counter-extremism efforts and,

ultimately, on embassy security.

-- Better Contacts: The past year has significantly increased the breadth of Mission contacts as the Mission worked hard to monitor the political crisis with all parts of Mauritanian society. Our political contacts at the level of parties but also in the parliament have greatly expanded as have contacts with media and civil society. The depth of many of these contacts, especially with those who were opposed to the coup, has also increased as we built an effective international/domestic pro-democracy partnership that forced our Mauritanian partners to go well beyond superficial diplomatically nice talk.

-- Better Mission Base: The Mission is better prepared for an expansion of our engagement than we were following the 2007 elections. Additional American positions have been created and staffed in all our reporting offices that will allow us to handle increased programs in Mauritania while maintaining reporting contacts. Our LES ICASS base has also increased compared to 2007.

-- More Sophisticated Partners: The past year has significantly increased the professionalism and effectiveness of political parties. Important institutions such as the Constitutional Council and the Independent National Electoral Commission have played well their important constitutional role. Cybermedia has grown in impact and sophistication.

-- Stronger Donor Liaison: The continual meetings between European embassies, the UN, EU and the U.S. embassy followed

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by the more formal International Contact Group (ICG) have built a greater degree of discussion and coordination between main donor countries. A similar level of coordination took place during the 2005-2007 political transition but fell away following Abdallahi's election. As the Dakar Accord speaks of continued ICG engagement with the new government, it will be important to keep our partners meeting with us and we, as a group, meeting with the Aziz government.

On The Negative Side:

-- Weakened Economy: No matter who had won July 18, the stark economic realities would have been the same. The government coffers are assumed to be empty, hard currency remains scarce, investor interest in petroleum and minerals is reduced somewhat by lower world prices and increased political and security risk in Mauritania, and the value of Mauritania's exports is low. Under the best of circumstances, Mauritania will have three lost years in terms of international development assistance -- the year Abdallahi spent negotiating development programs, the year of the coup, and now another year for Aziz to (re)negotiate agreements.

-- Less "Benefit of the Doubt": While Mauritania has passed the technical steps to once again be considered to have a democratically elected government, nobody is likely to embrace the Aziz government with the same hope and enthusiasm as Abdallahi. Where Abdallahi's government may have enjoyed a softening of criteria for some development programs (like the MCC threshold program) for heading in the right direction, we expect the Aziz government will be held to strict criteria.

-- Damaged Opposition: The electoral loss comes as a blow to the opposition parties that had successfully built and sustained a remarkable political coalition during the coup. Whether from an internal unraveling or due to harassment by the new government and Aziz' majority party, that coalition runs the risk of collapse. Such a collapse would promote negative tendencies in the new government.

-- Increased Terrorist Risk: The past year has increased both push and pull factors that have strengthened Al Qaeda in

Mauritania. Economic stagnation and undemocratic governance have added to the factors that convince some young Mauritians to join AQIM. A number of successful (from their perspective) AQIM operations have increased the street credibility and drawing power of this northwest African franchise of Al Qaeda, even as multiple ransom payments have increased AQIM's financial ability to conduct operations in the region.

-- Reduced Stability: The economic challenges alone ensure that Aziz will not be able to meet his multiple campaign promises. We anticipate financial shortages, currency rate changes, and inflation will make life more difficult for average Mauritians leading to the risk of food riots as seen in September-October 2007. With an opposition keen to highlight every misstep, Aziz will face criticism no matter how well intentioned his efforts. Should he simultaneously re-arrange the security apparatus, he may find some other general or colonel thinking he could do better.

-- Diplomatic Rivalries: After their tacit (and not-so-tacit) support for Aziz over the past year, European bilateral partners (especially the French) may challenge U.S. re-engagement with Mauritania. Though they may see otherwise, this is clearly not a competition. We have no trade interests here -- we were never able to generate serious U.S. business interest during the Abdallahi period. If the French were prepared to do everything needed to ensure Mauritanian counterterrorism capacity, we would likely say "you're welcome to it." But we don't see the French having the resources or desire to do much more than embed with the Mauritians -- giving them access and influence -- but not doing much to build capacity.

13. (C) Reporting Priorities: With a fragile democracy that must demonstrate its commitment to civil liberties within a changing security environment, the Mission will need to

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maintain a significant level of reporting contacts. We see our main priorities as:

-- Political Stability: This encompasses a wide range of issues including (a) building an understanding of the inner dynamics of the military and security hierarchy, (b) monitoring alliances and tensions within and between the main political groups, and (c) monitoring alliances and tensions between tribal, ethnic and regional groups. Reporting on parties is relatively easy while getting a clear picture of High Command or tribal dynamics is challenging.

-- Economics: As an early warning device for political and social unrest or for pending humanitarian emergencies, we will need to monitor economic trends carefully recognizing that official data may be intentionally altered to hide problems. We will also look for the expansion of negative trends in corruption as well as indicators of narcotics money.

-- Regional Dynamics: Any trend towards instability in Mauritania will be of keen interest to neighbors Morocco, Algeria, and Senegal with the two countries to the north having the ability to influence domestic affairs. The possible development of a relationship with Iran will be of importance to us and is likely to affect both internal politics as well as relations with Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. The possibility of greater counterterrorism cooperation between Mauritania and Algeria, Mali, and Niger will be of keen interest. The evolution of policy relative to Israel will continue to have international as well as domestic interest. As many of these issues have a North African and Middle East focus, Post will increase its emphasis on diplomats from those regions.

-- Abuses: The new government will be judged by many in the West on its performance in preserving and improving human rights. We will be particularly concerned about respect for

political and press freedoms. Given Mauritania's slide into Tier III TIP status, reporting on slavery, trafficking, and child abuse will have a priority.

-- Security: We will, of course, closely follow Al Qaeda activities in Mauritania as well as the government's response to the AQIM threat. Reporting will also look at social issues and public awareness related to extremism.

PROGRAM PRIORITIES

14. (C) Counterterrorism (Hard): The June 23 killing of AQIM's first American victim in the region coupled with increased AQIM capacity for operations here and elsewhere in the region makes "hard" counterterrorism cooperation our first priority and the area where we expect to have a great deal of access with the new Aziz government. Looking out at a six month timeframe, we would hope to accomplish the following:

-- Mauritanian Strategy: We will engage the new government to ascertain the status of the comprehensive "Hard" and "Soft" CT strategies that were in development prior to the coup.

-- Agreement on military needs: We will first want to assess the current capabilities and needs of Mauritania's three military counterterrorism units as well as other related units (the parachutists and camel battalions) with a view of renewing training and equip with, at least, the former GLATR and FUMA units in FY-10. In principle, we would be open to 5-7 JCETS and possibly the creation of two JPATs in FY-10.

-- Discussion on Police and Judicial cooperation: We would like to start a dialogue with the new government to see areas of greatest common concern. The need for increased forensics capability as well as training in defusing IEDs was clearly demonstrated in our liaison with the Mauritians following the Leggett killing. Over the long-term, we would like to see Mauritania actively participate in a new regionally-based ILEA academy as well as FBI advanced training courses.

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-- Staffing SOFLE Programs: We will again be able to fully staff the SOFLE, CMSE and MIST offices to build upon programs already underway and prepare for new mil-to-mil engagement. Resolving questions of SOFLE LES personnel requirements (we need them to get some local staff of their own), temporary CAA space, and delinquent/discontinued ICASS payments will be needed before any JCETS commence.

-- Creeksand: We will want to have Creeksand complete its familiarization of local air bases where it may be needed to conduct operations in support of the Mauritians. Depending on AFRICOM determination of regional operating priorities, Mission would be open to renewed non-emergency operations in Mauritania.

-- French Deconfliction: Whether done bilaterally in capitals, as part of the P3 security assistance review scheduled for September or October, or done locally, we will want to have a comprehensive review of counterterrorism programs with the French to ensure we neither get into an unproductive competition or leave key assistance areas uncovered. We would look for Department guidance on the best route for these consultations but caution that we should not let our own engagement strategy get to far advanced without that consultation.

-- Counter-narcotics Engagement Decision: We are aware of the growing significance of narcotics trafficking through Mauritania and the region. While the U.S. is not generally seen as a destination for these drugs, the trade itself poses

a risk in terms of money paid to AQIM by traffickers and the potential for internal corruption of Mauritanian civil, security and judicial authorities by narco-traffickers. While all reporting offices in Nouakchott have reported on the drug trade, we do not have a program response. We understand that AFRICOM is looking at a regional program and DEA is also interested in increasing its attention to west African trade; however, we look to Washington to decide whether this is an area we are prepared to put personnel and program money against.

15. (C) Counterterrorism (Soft): While the "hard" threat posed by AQIM forces operating out of Mali poses the greatest immediate risk for the Mission and Mauritania, the gradual internal radicalization of Mauritanian society remains the greater long-term threat to U.S. interests. We are serious when we speak about Mauritania's form of Islam as being peaceful and moderate. The vast majority of Mauritians abhor the terrorism they have seen in their country and are horrified to see radicalization take root in their country. That said, we are seeing some young Mauritians drawn to Al Qaeda. Our six-month goals:

-- Reactivate USAID Counter-extremism Program: We were making excellent inroads prior to the coup in creating an anti-extremism program with key ministries, moderate Islamic leaders, other donor partners, and civil society for programs that would start to address the root causes of extremism and to bolster the positive elements of Mauritanian society. While the USAID funding itself was modest relative to the task, USAID's presence had a catalyst effect in driving the discussion with Mauritians and international partners. The DOD MIST team has been able to advance some of this program during the coup with a pilot program in Aleg, but we see limitations on taking this to a national level or working with the GIRM without USAID.

-- National Strategy: As we engage on a "hard" CT strategy, we will also want to engage the new government on their "soft" strategy. Many of the concepts of our own USAID program were mirrored in a draft strategy developed during the Abdallahi administration -- with key elements concerning the drivers of extremism coming from Mauritania's security services. We will need to see how great a priority an Aziz government will give to this area of counterterrorism and how comfortable they will be working with the U.S. As before the coup, we will be keen in assisting the Mauritians develop their strategy. The MIST program would be well placed to support public information aspects of such a strategy.

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-- Country Specific TSCTP Conference: We would welcome an August Mauritania TSCTP conference in Nouakchott in August or, at the latest, early September to develop a coordinated "hard" and "soft" strategy. We would like the conference to include State AF/RSA, INL and S/CT as well as USAID, AFRICOM, LEGAT and possibly DHS and Coast Guard.

16. (C) Democratization: We cannot expect Mauritania to serve as the example of emerging democracies we had seen after President Abdallahi's election. Over the next year or so, our goal is to promote a stable government that respects its own law and constitution that pursues a positive social and economic agenda while maintaining a constructive relationship with opposition parties. Support for this goal will drive much of our reporting and contact work. Our six month programming goal:

-- Implement the FY-09 program submitted to the Department and USAID July 23 for an NDI and NEDWA collaboration to support grass-roots civic education, the National Assembly, and press professionalization.

-- Develop an FY-10 program to support fragile institutions including capacity training for civil society, support of the

Association of Mayors, and development of partnerships between the Constitutional Council as the National Independent Electoral Commission with U.S. and good regional counterparts.

-- We would like to develop a strategy to expand ties to the future leaders of Mauritania. Part of this would include expansion of language training programs at the National Administration School (where all mid-level and senior-level civil servants are trained) as well as new programs at the National Military Academy, Command and General Staff School, and Police Academy. English language skills are in dire demand across the Mauritania government. English courses allow interaction with future leaders and, through guest speakers and instructional materials, offers the opportunity to stimulate democratic discussion.

¶7. (C) Human Rights: Mauritania continues to slide against key human rights criteria making the promotion of viable development less credible and creating the conditions that promote extremism. Mission goals:

-- Slavery Framework: We hope to work with the new government to develop an ambitious but achievable strategy allowing Mauritania to address the vestiges of slavery still present in the country including child servitude. The strategy would also need to address newer trafficking issues that have arisen over the past year including the export of child brides to Gulf states. We will also seek Department programming resources aimed at reinforcing Mauritania enforcement of existing legal structures and forging greater trust and cooperation between anti-slavery advocates and the Mauritanian authorities charged with the problem/

-- Refugee Assistance: We expect the repatriation of refugees from Senegal to Mauritania to be completed within a short period. Reintegration of those refugees remains a significant challenge. We will welcome a visit by PRM to develop an engagement strategy with the GIRM and our partners.

-- Human Rights Monitoring: We will develop a proposal to increase the professional capacity of local human rights organizations and interested media to identify and document human rights abuses to a level that meets legal requirements.

¶8. (C) Public Diplomacy: Post will be opening its first public access Information Resource Center in October 2009. PD is hiring an additional staff member who will direct this IRC as well as the outreach in posts existing American Corners in Nouakchott and help with the opening of another in the interior of the country. PDQ,s outreach will extend to contacts it could not reach post-coup and will continue to work with journalists, alumni and cultural contacts to forward missionQ,s priority goals. The new on-embassy public access space will increase outreach to key audiences and

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provide a platform from which to disseminate information on democracy, human rights and counter-extremism. Given that the assumption among Mauritians had been one of lack of activity on the part of the US Embassy in Mauritania, post intends to combat this misperception highlighting all of the activities since August 2008 including visiting speakers and cultural events, book donations, humanitarian aid to refugees and journalist training.

¶9. (C) Development and Humanitarian Assistance: We expect humanitarian assistance priorities to remain high over the coming year both because of the habitual natural impact of desertification but because of anticipated financial difficulties for the new government that may lead to severe shortages of food in urban areas -- or at least of food Mauritanian poor can afford. We expect the next year to focus on the creation and negotiation of new development assistance projects with donors. Mission goals:

-- Proceed on OFDA and FFP staffing proposals for Mauritania.

-- Review USAID expansion plan for Africa to consider bilateral mission in Mauritania starting in FY-10 focused not only of humanitarian programs but also on democracy and good governance initiatives.

¶10. (C) Resource Management: Our 2007-2008 experience provides lessons learned on the challenges of rapid program expansion. The year of the coup allowed the Mission to build its personnel base to avoid the "flooding of the engine" we encountered before, but we will remain keenly aware of the risks of taking on more programs than we have staff and facilities to support. The new political and security environment raise quality of life issues we will want to address as well. Mission Goals:

-- New Rightsizing exercise: We expect to revive our efforts to obtain property for an NEC (or gain permission for our preferred option of building the NEC on our existing compound) in the coming months. As a part of that effort, we are reviewing our Rightsizing data to ensure that the NEC reflects the increased counterterrorism reporting and operations activities as well as long-term USAID presence.

-- School: We will gauge the new government to determine whether this is the time to seek a bilateral school agreement that will give the American school a more secure legal and tax status in Mauritania. Avoiding any problems in this regard is key to the schools survival and has significant impact on our ability to recruit American staff.

BOULWARE